DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 901 JC 810 283

AUTHOR Friedlander, Jack
TITLE Why Don't Poorly Prepared Students Seek Help?
INSTITUTION Center for the Study of Community Colleges, Los Angeles, Calif.
PUB DATE 20 May 81
NOTE 14p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Policy; Community Colleges; *Educational Counseling; *Remedial Programs; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Student Participation; Student Responsibility; Two Year Colleges; *Two Year College Students

ABSTRACT

In light of the substantial commitment of resources to counseling and institutional support services, a study was undertaken to determine the extent to which these services are reaching their intended audience. The study drew from an in-class survey of 6,426 students at a large, urban community college district. Among other items, the students were asked to: (1) indicate their degree of confidence in their reading, writing, arithmetic, algebra, science, and study skills; (2) identify which, if any, of the college's support services they had used; and (3) state their reasons for not using these services. The survey revealed that of the students who did not feel confident in one or more skill areas, less than 30% took advantage of a remediating support program. Of those students lacking confidence in their skills and not using a support service, approximately 50% said they did not need the service and 35% stated that they lacked the time to use the service or that it was offered at an inconvenient time. In light of these findings, community colleges should consider whether they should take steps to insure that students with skill deficiencies receive the remediation they need; whether a demonstration of basic skills proficiency should be a requirement for graduation; and whether students who lack basic skills and the time to strengthen their skills should be permitted to enroll in courses. (JP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED203901

Why Don't Poorly Prepared Students Seek Help?

Jack Friedlander

Center for the Study of Community Colleges

May 20, 1981

JC 810 283

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Arthur M. Cohen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

[X] This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

[ ] Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Why Don't Poorly-Prepared Students Seek Help?

Jack Friedlander

Center for the Study of Community Colleges

Since the early 1970s there has been a steady increase in the number of students in the community colleges who enter with serious deficiencies in basic skills, poorly-developed study habits, and inadequate mastery of high school subject matter (Lukenbill and McCabe, 1978; Cohen and Brawer, 1981). Results of testing programs indicated that in many urban community colleges, over 40 percent of the entering students are deficient in their reading, writing, and computational skills (Friedlander, 1981a; McCabe, 1981).

Studies conducted at the national and district levels showed that faculty members are finding it difficult to present college level courses to students lacking the educational background needed to succeed in their classes. Results of nationwide surveys (Cohen and Brawer, 1977; Brawer and Friedlander, 1979; Cohen and Friedlander, 1980) of teachers in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences revealed that over half of the faculty said their courses could be made better if they had "students who were better prepared to handle course requirements." Faculty members in a large urban multi-campus community college district reported that over 50 percent of the students enrolled in their classes have difficulty or are unable to understand course reading assignments, express themselves in writing, learn on their own, solve problems that require arithmetic, or understand science developments (Friedlander, 1981). Among the findings reported in an accreditation study conducted at Miami-Dade Community College District was that instructors are

finding that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to maintain quality education when a number of students lack proficiency in basic skills. In addition, many instructors do not feel they have the proper training needed to teach students who are academically underprepared (Lukenbill and McCabe, 1978).

The major approach used by community colleges to cope with the vast numbers of underprepared students has been to establish or greatly expand their academic support programs (Cross, 1976; Maxwell, 1979). These have typically included remedial courses, tutoring, special instructional services (e.g., reading and writing laboratories, audio-tutorial programs) and counseling (personal, academic, and career).

Given the substantial commitment of resources needed to sustain these programs, and the significance of their objectives, it would seem important at this time to assess the extent to which these support services are reaching their intended audiences. This question is especially pertinent because participation in many, and in some colleges all, of the support programs and services is voluntary (Cross, 1976).

The objectives of this study were to address the following three questions: (1) What percentage of the students who felt they were weak in an academic skill took advantage of a college assistance program designed to correct that deficiency? And (2) What reasons did students who noted that they were weak in an academic skill give for not using a college support service from which they could benefit?

The questions on student skills and their use of support services can be answered from data obtained in a survey of students enrolled in a cross-section of courses in a large multi-campus urban community college district. This study sponsored by the National Science Foundation and conducted by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges involved administering surveys to students in every thirteenth class section offered at 10:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. on Wednesday of the

fifth week of the 1980 Fall term. Completed surveys were obtained from 6,426 students enrolled in 268 of the 326 class sections (82% response rate) in which the survey was administered.

Results

Percentage of Students Using Academic Support Services

A major objective of this study was to determine the percentage of students who felt they were weak in an academic skill and who took advantage of a college assistance program designed to correct that deficiency. Two of the items on the Student Survey were used to satisfy this objective. One of the items had students rate their skills on a three-point scale ("confident," "somewhat confident," "not confident") in a variety of areas. These included reading, writing, arithmetic, algebra, science, and study skills. The other item used in this study had students indicate which, if any, of nine support programs they had taken advantage of at their college.

The data presented in Figure 1 show that of those students who did not feel confident in a skill area, less than 30% took advantage of a support program designed to assist them in that skill area.

Insert Figure 1 Here

More specifically:

Of the students who did not feel confident in their writing ability, 29% sought some type of assistance for their writing skills;

Of those who did not feel confident in their reading ability, 28% took advantage of the college's support programs to improve reading;

Of those students who did not feel confident in their ability to solve

problems that require arithmetic, 20% received assistance from a college support program in developmental mathematics; and,

Of those students who were not confident in their ability in science, 10% took advantage of the college support program in that area.

These findings indicate that despite the efforts to provide students with the support programs and assistance they need to succeed in college-level courses, the majority of those who can profit most from the assistance provided are not taking advantage of these programs. The information reported in Figure 1 also shows that there is little or no difference in the use of support services by students who are confident and those who are not confident in their abilities.

Reasons Students Give for Not Using Support Services

One of the items on the Student Survey asked respondents who did not use a particular support service to indicate the primary reason they had for not doing so. The response categories were as follows: "I do not need it;" "I have no time for it;" "Service is offered at an inconvenient time;" "I have heard that this service is not very helpful." The data presented in Table 1 are based on only those students who reported a lack of confidence in a skill area and who did not take advantage of a support program designed to correct that deficiency.

Insert Table 1 Here

As shown in Table 1, the reason most student had for not using a support service from which they could benefit was that they did not feel a need for the service. The second most frequently cited reason for not taking advantage of a needed support service was that they had no time. The third most mentioned reason given for not using a service was that it was offered at an inconvenient

time. Less than four percent of the students noted that they did not use a support service designed to correct a skill in which they were deficient because they heard that service was not very helpful.

A surprising finding to appear in Table 1 was the high percentage of students --in most instances over 50%--who felt they did not need assistance from a support service designed to correct a skill area in which they were deficient. Possibly, this response resulted from students' belief that a particular skill in which they were weak was not really needed to succeed in the courses in which they were enrolled.

The data presented in Table 1 demonstrates that the factor of time--(1) no time for service and (2) service offered at an inconvenient time--was cited by over 35% of the students as the primary deterrent preventing them from improving their skills in the ability areas upon which education is based--reading, writing, arithmetic, and study skills. For example, of those students who were not confident in their writing ability and who did not seek assistance to improve their writing, 53% stated that they did not do so either because they did not have time to use the assistance services provided (34.6%), or that the service was offered at an inconvenient time (18.4%).

Discussion

Most community colleges have initiated comprehensive support programs and services to help students succeed in college. These programs are similar in their basic objectives and in the kinds of services they employ to help students. The programs differ in the methods used and in the assumptions on which these methods are based.

One widely used approach to help students adjust to academic demands is to make comprehensive support programs known and easily accessible to them but

leave the involvement in these programs completely up to the student. This approach is based on the assumption that if these students need help they will take the initiative to seek assistance from an appropriate campus resource. According to this assumption, students who are weak in math will take the initiative to seek help through tutoring, developmental math courses, or some other related resource.

Although this method of relying on student initiative to take advantage of campus resources is widespread, one finding of this study showed that in a district where such a method was in effect, less than 30% of those students who did not feel confident in a basic skill area took advantage of a college support service designed to correct that deficiency. In fact, students who lacked confidence in their academic abilities were, in most instances, no more likely to seek assistance from an appropriate academic support service than were those who were confident in their abilities. These findings lead to the following policy question. Should community colleges leave it to the students' own initiative to develop the skills necessary to succeed in the courses in which they enroll? Or should the colleges require them to take whatever steps are necessary to develop proficiency in basic skill areas needed to succeed in their courses?

The fundamental goals of most community college educational programs include the development of student competencies in such basic skill areas as reading, writing, computing, and science. Given the importance of these objectives, it was somewhat surprising to learn that such a high percentage of the students who were deficient in these basic skill areas did not feel they needed assistance from a related college support service. One possible explanation for this finding is that such students may not see the need to improve their skills in these areas because these skills were not required to pass the courses in which the students

were enrolled. To the extent that this explanation is true, then the following policy question needs to be addressed. Should community colleges assume that all students will have developed at least a minimum proficiency in such basic skill areas as reading, writing, computing, and understanding science upon the completion of their general education courses? Or should all students in degree and certificate programs be required to demonstrate proficiency in these basic skills in order to be awarded an Associate's degree or occupational certificate?

Over 40 percent of the students who were deficient in a basic skill and who did not seek assistance from the college support programs reported that they did not have time to use the service or that the service was offered at an inconvenient time. If students who are weak in basic skills needed to succeed in their courses do not have time to take advantage of needed support programs--either because they are enrolled in the evening, attend college part-time, are employed full-time, or have other commitments--then the following policy question should be asked. Should community colleges continue to offer courses to students who, for whatever reasons, are not willing to devote the extra time needed to strengthen their skills and let the students sink or swim? Or should colleges only offer courses to students who are willing to commit whatever time is needed to do well in their courses?

Evaluations of the effectiveness of college ancillary services should be based on both the extent to which these services are used by students for whom the programs are especially designed to serve and on the effects these programs have on student learning and development. The findings of this study suggest that no matter how good a college's ancillary services may be, a substantial proportion of the students who could benefit most from these programs will not, if left to their own initiative, take advantage of them either because they don't feel they need the service or because they do not have time for it. College

managers should keep these findings in mind when deciding which of the following alternatives to pursue: leave the involvement in academic support programs completely up to the student; have college staff members take the initiative to encourage academically underprepared students to seek assistance from an appropriate support service; or have the college take the initiative by instituting policies which require students to do whatever is needed to develop proficiency in those basic skill areas needed to succeed in their courses.

References

Brawer, F.B., and Friedlander, J. Science and Social Science in the Two-Year College. Topical Paper No. 69. Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Community Colleges and ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, 1979.

Cohen, A.M., and Brawer, F.B. "Functional Literacy for Community College Students." Paper presented at the Conference on Adult Literacy, Ann Arbor, Mich., June, 1981.

Cohen, A.M., and Brawer, F.B. The Two-Year College Instructor Today. New York: Praeger, 1977.

Cohen, A.M., and Friedlander, J. "What Do Instructors Want?" Community College Review, 1980, 7, 66-71.

Cross, P.K. Accent on Learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc. Publishers, 1976.

Friedlander, J. Student and Faculty Ratings of Academic Abilities of Community College Students. Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Community Colleges, 1981a. (ED Number to be assigned.)

Friedlander, J. "Educational Abilities and Success of Students Enrolled in Community College Liberal Arts Courses." Community College Review, 1981b. (In press.)

Lukenbill, J.D., and McCabe, R.H. General Education in a Changing Society. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1978.

Maxwell, M. Improving Student Learning Skills. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1979.

McCabe, R.H. Now is the Time to Reform the American Community College. Miami, Fla.: Miami-Dade Community College, 1981. (ED Number to be assigned.)

Figure 1

CONFIDENCE OF STUDENTS IN THEIR ABILITIES

AND THEIR USE OF SUPPORT SERVICES

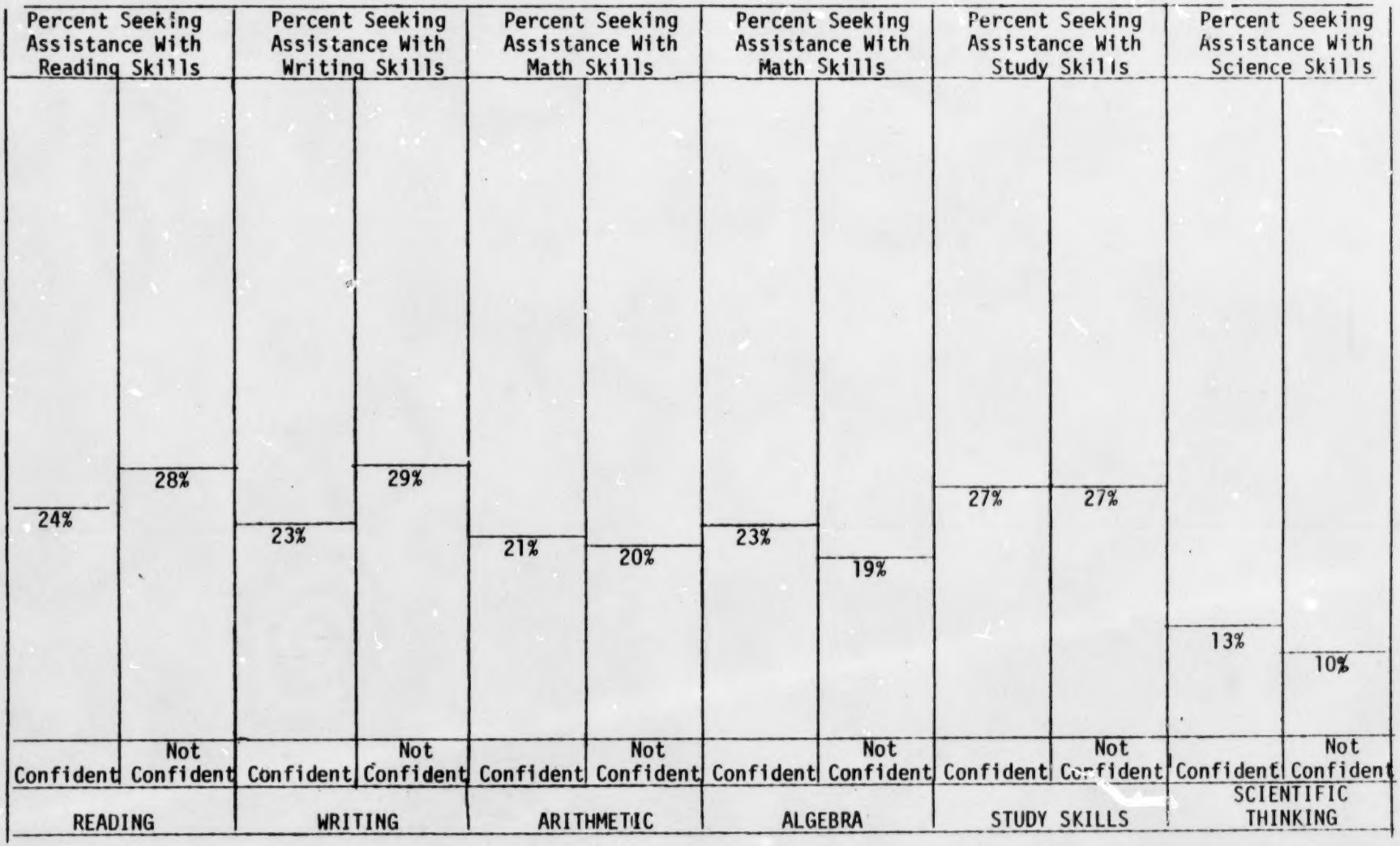

Table 1

Reasons Students Who Were Not Confident in a Skill Gave for Not Using a Support Service from Which they Could Benefit

(In percentages)

Not Confident (NC) in Skill and Did Not Seek Assistance	Do Not Need Service	No Time for Service	Service Offered at Inconvenient Time	Heard Service Was Not Helpful
NC in reading and no help in reading	50.2	29.6	17.5	2.7
NC in reading and no basic skills course	49.5	27.8	19.7	3.0
NC in writing and no help in writing	44.2	34.6	18.4	2.8
NC in writing and no basic skills course	58.2	25.2	14.3	2.2
NC in arithmetic and no basic skills course in math	60.6	22.8	14.1	2.5
NC in arithmetic and no tutoring in math	60.9	22.1	14.3	2.7
NC in algebra and no basic skills course in math	66.7	19.6	12.2	1.6
NC in algebra and no tutoring in math	66.9	19.2	12.0	1.9
NC in science and no basic skills course in science	73.1	16.9	8.2	1.8
NC in science and no tutoring in science	71.8	17.1	9.2	1.9
NC in study skills and no help with study skills	43.9	31.6	20.4	4.1

JUL 31 1981

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE FOR
JUNIOR COLLEGES
96 POWELL LIBRARY BUILDING
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90024

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE FOR
JUNIOR COLLEGES
96 POWELL LIBRARY BUILDING
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90024